

Shakespeare Haunts: A Study of *Pulijanmam* as a Modern Rendering of *Hamlet*

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The spirit of Shakespeare continues to haunt contemporary playwrights and film-makers even 400 years after the death of the great bard. When adapted to the big screen by creative writers, Shakespearean tragedies continue to enthrall movie audience even today, transcending time and space. Human experience and predicament has not undergone much change, despite the revolutionary changes brought to the modern world by science and technology. Shakespearean thoughts hold good to anyone who is willing to pause, reflect and introspect. The paradigms that create Shakespearean tragic hero, particularly the mindset of Hamlet, can be discerned in any modern mind. The predicament of the idealistic hero though not universal is mirrored in many a modern mind. Perhaps that is why tragic heroes of Shakespeare appear and re-appear on screen in modern adaptations of Shakespearean plays.

Shakespearean tragedies are woven essentially around conflict. The external conflict at the onset of the play is soon internalized with the male protagonist becoming the source as well as the target of the conflict. The moral predicament conceived in the hero's mind slowly spreads to the outside world and affects everybody directly and indirectly connected to him. There is purgation and elevation, but they cannot avert the imminent destruction. The plight of

the hero arouses pity and fear, yet the moral dilemma remains unresolved. These characteristics of the Shakespearean tragedy are found in the Malayalam movie *Pulijanmam*. The story of Prakashan is interwoven with that of the folk-hero Kari who sacrifices himself for the sake of the well being of his people.

The National Award winning movie, *Pulijanmam*, directed by Priyanandanan, carries the hue and shades of a classic. From a critical perspective, the film seems to be a modern rendering of a Shakespearean tragedy. The hero Prakashan (played by BharathMurali) traverses a journey similar to that of Hamlet-the two protagonists who suffer because of their idealism and sensitivity. Prakashan appears to be a modern Hamlet, carrying with him the weight of his soul burdened with the urge to change the system, but pulled down by the evil around him; the very evil he yearns to wipe away. An educated middle-aged man, Prakashan is an idealist who dreams of an egalitarian society free from communal rivalry and hegemony. He tries to revive the fading culture of his land and inspire the youth through the theatre. By enacting the lore of Kari, (his alter ego), Prakashan identifies himself with the folk-hero who is selected by the ruler to go to the tiger's den to bring medicine for his sickness. Like Hamlet, he is determined to pursue his goal of purgating his land. He tries to spread secular and democratic spirit in a land threatened by communalism. In his urge to transform the outside world and caught in the politics of corruption, Prakashan unwittingly becomes unjust to his mother and sister by ignoring them and consequently loses them. His sister is caught in the web of pseudo-spiritualism and his mother loses her sanity. Like the Shakespearean tragic hero, Prakashan falls into isolation, tormented by the outside world whose evil he is unable to wipe away. Tortured and tormented by his idealism, his mind is shattered and he becomes insane.

According to Aristotelian concept, a tragic hero should be a person of noble birth with heroic or potentially heroic qualities. He occupies a social position which is not just well above the multitude but one that excites envy as well. His fortunes suffer a reversal from good to bad because of some flaw in personality. Though he rallies against an overwhelming fate and fails, he earns our admiration for holding his own in the cosmic conflict. Thus, Hamlet is the beloved prince of Denmark. Hamlet's flaw that is his indecision or procrastination has been the topic of too many a scholar that it does not merit further discussion. Yet among all Shakespearian tragic heroes, Hamlet holds a unique position. One can even say he is flawless, should refinement and sensitivity be his crime. Hamlet feels that he alone is weighed down by the responsibility of finding a panacea for the ills that plague Denmark. The lament of Hamlet in the following lines clearly depict his agony. "The time is out of joint. O cursed spite that ever I was born to set it right." (Act I, Scene 5). Prakashan too faces a similar dilemma. He is no prince but an ordinary man, a committed Marxian- one who is accursed with insight and yet incapable of changing the world. Like Hamlet and his alter ego Kari, Prakashan is also a fine, accomplished man- the chosen one because people look up to him. While Kari chooses to go to the forest in search of medicine, Prakashan resorts to theatre as an antidote for the sick society. *Pulijanmam* differs from *Hamlet* primarily in the attitudes of the respective heroes. While Hamlet suffers from inaction, Prakashan and Kari are active heroes, unafraid of action. In spite of the warning given by the Pottan, Kari takes rather an impulsive decision and pretends not to be affected by Vellachi's tears. Prakashan is too sensitive not to respond to the strife outside. His very life is action as he is brave and selfless. The isolation does him in and the brave comrade dies a miserable death arousing pity and fear.

His personality merges with Kari who loses his human form and identity in the course of his adventurous cause. Thus the inaction and procrastination of Hamlet and Kari and Prakashan's action meet with a similar end. Time never becomes propitious for them to right the wrongs that they witness in the world, they end paying for it with their lives.

Hamlet's sense of responsibility finds parallel in Kari's and Prakashan's responsibility towards their society. All three are cursed with an insight born of intelligence and sensitivity. They are alive to the ills that plague their society and are in their own ways, helpless to change it. Still, they arm themselves to fight with swords that do not protect. Their conflict leads to their tragic isolation, one that can only end in death. The statement „something is rotten in the state of Denmark“ is easily paralleled in Kari's observation, “VazhunnavarkkuPranthe/MattulluvarkkellamAdi” which means „the ruler is mad and the citizens are agitated.“ Thus, like Hamlet, Prakashan too gets incessant calls from within to change the world.

A tragic hero, at the end of his journey, is often bestowed with self- realization. This knowledge often carries the weight of a mystical experience. Often their journey is symbolized by forays into other world of experiences such as temporary insanity, world of the supernatural, dream visions and so on. The hero is unable to articulate his vision and Hamlet gracefully concludes it as, “The rest is silence” (Act V, Sc 2). Kari is driven to a shamanic experience when he dons the guise of a tiger. Prakashan lives to see the complete breakdown of his personal and social universe. But what destroys him completely is the death of the egalitarian world that he had envisaged. Perhaps the fatal flaw of all the three characters is their inability to gauge the

power of evil that they confront, the hubris of a man who sets out to correct what gods wrought on the human stage. Perhaps the famous words of Hamlet reflect this humble understanding on his part. As he observes to Horatio, “There’s a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, ’tis not to come. If it be not to come, it will be now. If it be not now, yet it will come—the readiness is all” (Act V Sc 2). The grace that is possible for an Elizabethan hero cannot be replicated in a modern skeptical age and so the only possible end for Kari and Prakashan is exile and madness.

The play *Hamlet* takes on as its central image, the image of disease. Evil is seen as a cancerous growth that affects all aspects of the society. Hamlet’s father’s death, his uncle marrying his mother and the subsequent corruption that emanates from the royal bed of Denmark leaves no relation untouched. The evil that is presented in the play ranges from the sublime to the ridiculous. The only relationship that remains uncorrupted is the friendship between Hamlet and Horatio. Prakashan’s world is also riddled with the same kind of corruption that had beset Denmark. Corrupt rulers, politicians, religious heads, selfish friends, all point to a society that has forgotten basic human values. The morally corrupted world finds its reflection in the land and rivers as well. Prakashan in spite of his getting better job elsewhere prefers to remain a farmer. He chooses to express his close commitment to the land in this way. He is agitated when he realizes that large tracts of land and waters have been taken over by corporate giants to build a resort. Such a world whether it is Denmark or Kerala, cannot help, but turn on itself. The horrors unleashed by unchecked evil dances the dance of death claiming the innocent and the guilty alike. At the end of the play, only Horatio survives because Hamlet requests him to stay back to tell his story. In Shakespearean tragedies, after the catastrophe,

there is the promise of a new ordered world as seen in the arrival of Fortinbras. But in the nihilistic modern world, there is no hope for restoration of order because nothing positive survives.

Of particular interest are the women characters in the play and in the movie. Both *Hamlet* and *Pulijanmam* have important women roles that have considerable bearing on the trajectory on the heroes' lives. It would seem if the women were better endowed with an understanding of the situation, the tragedy could have been averted. The women characters taken up for study are Ophelia, Hamlet's sweetheart, Vellachi, Kari's wife and Shahnaz, Prakashan's lover. Ophelia, the youngest of all the three women, fails to grasp the magnitude of Hamlet's problem. She being young as yet unused to the world of corruption suspects that Hamlet no longer loves her. The sexual innuendo explicit in the words of Polonius, her father, and Hamlet do not make any impression on her, as she fails to understand their import. And in her lunacy and death, she becomes a victim of the corrupted world of Denmark. Ophelia's mature understanding of the situation could have greatly diminished the tragic isolation of Hamlet. Shahnaz and Vellachi also perform a similar function in the movie. Unwittingly they add to the tragic isolation of Kari and Prakashan. The female protagonist in the film, Shahnaz, is drastically different from Ophelia. A middle-aged divorcee, she is an intellectual peer to Prakashan. She is fascinated by his ideas and spirit, but does not dare enough to be with him at the time of crisis. If Ophelia held back on account of her ignorance, Shahnaz does the same for the opposite reason. She fully realizes the consequences of her action and does not want to endanger herself. She makes herself secure and seeks to be away from him because she is frightened of the consequences. Like Kari's Vellachi, she is frightened of her lover's daring spirit and is not willing to be with

his selfless endeavor. Vellachi and Shahnaz share the knowledge of the consequences of their action. Both are frightened to inaction which in turn drive their men to madness and exile. Prakashan's mother has nothing in similar to the regal Gertrude. She is an ordinary illiterate mother who goes out of her senses when she loses her daughter. The mother, we realize, was Prakashan's solace and her insanity becomes instrumental in hastening his tragedy. While Gertrude is the initiator of Hamlet's undoing, it is the tragedy of his mother and the cowardice of his lover that leads Prakashan to his miserable end. He has no friend like Horatio to tell his tale and Prakashan dies the death of an idealistic hero in the insensitive modern world.

The magic of Shakespeare continues to enthrall script-writers in their plot-construction and characterization. The Shakespearean tragic hero is present in every noble soul prone to error of judgement. That is why adaptations of tragic heroes appear and reappear. The great bard still visits our lives and spirits to remind mankind that it is man himself who creates his destiny or to quote A.C.Bradley, "Character is destiny". The good and evil are within him and he suffers from the eternal conflict of these two polarities. Trying to sort out these differences is the essence of life and even when one gives up the struggle, one can be sure that one is ennobled all the same for the attempt. In that sense, all tragic heroes of Shakespeare are demi-gods like Kari, or leaders like Prakashan, powerful enough to influence not just the course of their lives but also of their society. Thus, Shakespeare's tragic heroes rise to the level of super-heroes who lose themselves in their pursuit for their better selves. With Prakashan's agony echoing the angst of Hamlet, Shakespeare proves once again to be for all times.

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